

History
of the
Federated Church
Brooklyn CT



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Strolling Through Our History

The following articles were prepared as Bulletin Inserts as part of knowing
“Who Is Our Church”

The history of the Federated Church of Christ in Brooklyn encompasses the time period from early colonial days to the present. It presents an interesting picture of the history of the whole Christian Church in North America, as it includes the colonial struggles, the Revolutionary War, the rise of the Unitarian way of faith, the separation of Church and State, the Great Awakening, the Civil War, the Federation, and today's conflicts.

We need to go way back to understand the role of the Church in the lives of our colonial predecessors. In colonial days, folks started a migration from the settled towns and cities, and established new towns as they moved out. A key element in the life of these folks was their church, and as they moved out, it was difficult to get to church services using the very limited transportation available. Roads were poor (even though our present Route 169 was the toll-road from Norwich to Worcester), and horses were the primary mode of travel.

Soon it became apparent that a new church was needed, and an application was made to the State Legislature to establish a new ecclesiastical society to serve a growing town. Usually these new societies were “children” of an established society, and the church in Brooklyn was formed from the church in Pomfret.

Separation of Church and State was an unknown concept at this time. The church of that day was the central focus of the town. One had to belong to a church in order to own property, and the church became the governing body of the town. The minister of the church was a key figure in the life of the community, and in

many cases was called as a young person to serve and stayed for a lifetime. The minister was given a house (and at least in the case of Josiah Whitney, also a woodlot). Town meetings were held in the “meetinghouse”, and residents were taxed for support of the church, as the seat of government.

Historian's Work

Over several years, the late Mr. Herbert Leach, as Church Historian, collected and cataloged the over 600 records found in our church archives. His hand-written listings have been entered into a database which permits searching these records in chronological order, or by subject matter. These various documents cover a period from 1726 to the present date. There are many letters, deeds, and record books that detail the life of the two original church societies, and the Federated Church. Some records that may be of particular interest:

In the 1940's the State Library collected original church records from various churches, photocopied them, and returned the copies to the churches in bound volumes (retaining the originals in the State Library). We have 6 volumes that detail the life of the First Trinitarian Church from 1726 to 1898, providing all sorts of statistics about the life of that church.

In the various papers relating to the First Baptist Church, there are some 35 letters either written by or written to Deacon Brown, covering the period 1869 to 1872. This is the period during which the church building was being built, and Deacon Brown appears to have been the "sparkplug" in this great undertaking.

The catalogs of these archives are available, and time spent looking at these old records can present an interesting glimpse of what the life of the church was like through the many years. Also, the updated History booklet describing our church through these many years is available for those who may want a copy. Please contact the church office if you need one.

At the time this was originally written, information was presented on parts of this history, so that we all might better understand where our churches came from: the

Trinitarian Congregational Church, the Baptist Church, and the Federated Church of Christ.

The Nineteenth Century

The Revolutionary War had its impact upon the community, as did also the political ideology of the day. A firm supporter of the church in Brooklyn was Israel Putnam, who was later to be influential in the Battle of Bunker Hill, and was for a time to be the second in command to General Washington.

Now the church was entering the 19th century. As the 19th century dawned, the Church was still the center of life for most people. But the seeds of change had been planted. There were new ways of faith emerging, and new churches were becoming a part of the landscape. Revivals were to be a part of the history of the Church, and so too were the influences of the increasing industrialization.

The impact of the second Great Awakening was felt in Brooklyn. Revivals became an important part of the life of the Church, and folks were called to repent and start a new life. Conversion through a revival experience became a test of whether one could join the church or not. However, this was not the viewpoint of those who embraced the Unitarian way of faith.

Brooklyn was at the focal point of the Unitarian activities in Boston on the north. As the name suggests, the Unitarians perceived of God in a hierarchal manner, much like an organizational chart: Father, then Son, then Holy Ghost. Conversely, the Trinitarians saw God with three “persons”, or faces, each with equal status. In Massachusetts the Unitarians took over many of the Congregational churches, while in Connecticut only one church was so affected; the church in Brooklyn. In 1819 the Unitarian faction took over the meetinghouse and many of the members. The Trinitarians were left to fend for themselves, and formed a new ecclesiastical society, the First Trinitarian Church of Brooklyn.

Brooklyn had people who identified with the Baptists as early as 1815. Then, on March 31, 1828, about twenty persons gathered at the home of David C. Bolles “that they should be constituted and organized as a regular gospel church.” And so the First Baptist Church of Brooklyn got its start.

The freedom-of-religion influences of Rhode Island on the east, and the rise of new ways of faith, led at the same time to a move to separate the State from the Church. Our Baptist predecessors, even in Brooklyn, were in the forefront of this move. The pastor of the First Baptist Church at that time was the Rev. David Bolles, who was the son of Judge David Bolles of Ashford. Judge Bolles had long been an advocate of the separation of Church and State in Connecticut, and was the first Baptist permitted to argue the Baptist case before the two houses of the Legislature as the fate of the new State Constitution was being argued. A new Constitution for Connecticut was adopted in 1818, and no longer was the Church the seat of government. Brooklyn voted overwhelmingly for its adoption.

The two Brooklyn churches faced many issues during the ensuing years. Temperance became a major issue, as also did the rising move for abolition of the segregation of races. Strong advocates for abolition existed in all the churches of Brooklyn. The outcome of this issue, as we know, led the nation into that conflict known as the Civil War, or the War Between the States. Following the Civil War there was a period of relative quiet, as the nation recovered from its wounds.

The 19th century closed on this note, as the Church prepared to move into the 20th century.

Into the Twentieth Century

The nineteenth century closed with the “Gay Nineties”. The Baptist Church had about 110 members, and the Trinitarian Church had about 90. The future of the two churches appeared to be fairly well assured, as a new century opened before the people. Then the nation went through the “War to end all Wars”, what is now known as the First World War. This of course visited hardships on the whole community, as the young men went off to war.

After the war, in 1919 the Trinitarian church put itself on record as “being in favor of fraternizing with the Baptist and Unitarian bodies in this town for the purpose of entering into a plan of federation.” These efforts did not produce fruit, but proposals were followed in 1921 and again in 1922. However, the Baptist Church rejected the proposals, and the Unitarians followed suit. Again in 1923 a new plan for: forming a Community Church was taken to the community at large, but this did not come to pass and by August the proposals had again been rejected.

This was the period of the “roaring twenties”, and the nation appeared to be entering into prosperous times. However, in 1929 this prosperous outlook perished as the stock market crashed. The nation was plunged into a terrible time of financial depression, and great fortunes were lost and many business ventures failed. Many people were now without employment. This was reflected in the life of the churches. Church membership declined in both churches, with Baptist church membership down to about 34 members (and by 1937 down to only eleven). Perhaps it was time to re-visit the plans of 1919-1923. Was some sort of federation possible?

Federation

In 1938, New England was devastated by a massive hurricane. Damage was widespread, and Brooklyn was not spared. The steeple of the Trinitarian church was lifted up and plunged through the building, with major damage resulting. This was the time of the Depression, and the costs of rebuilding were too much for the dwindling congregation. After much discussion, the decision was made not to rebuild. Partly because of this decision the Pastor resigned, and the congregation now was without a Pastor or a place to meet.

At the same time, the Baptist church membership was down to eleven people. They had an undamaged building, but met only once a year for worship and a business meeting. They offered the use of their sanctuary to the Trinitarians, an offer that was accepted.

The Rev. Dr. Paul Lynn was sent to the church by the Raymond Fund of the Connecticut Congregational Conference, and started serious talks about working to join the two congregations together in some form of federation. In September of 1940 Dr. Lynn's work bore fruit, and the two churches agreed to become the Federated Church of Christ in Brooklyn. Each congregation retained its own identity and property, but otherwise functioned as a single church.

The successful federation functioned well, and by 1978 the church was ready to formally recognize their status by incorporating as the Federated Church of Christ, with all functions carried on by the new church. In this period, the church was to call six pastors. Four of these pastorates were fairly lengthy, but two lasted only a year each. Membership numbers fluctuated, but the church retained its strength as it served a broader and more diversified community of faith.

Demographic Dynamics

“Demographics” are the study of the characteristics of human populations, such as size, growth, density, distribution, and vital statistics. With this in mind, a church needs to know many of these factors in order to have growth and strength in its community.

In colonial days, life was relatively stable. Brooklyn was located on a main north-south route, and was fairly prosperous. This was basically an agricultural area, with farms both large and small. There was some small manufacturing (even a spectacle factory) and many imposing homes.

However, the Industrial Revolution was to change this rather drastically. To our east, the Quinebaug River provided the power needed for manufacturing, and the railroads provided transportation. The towns bordering the rivers became the new focal point, and immigrant labor changed the population mix. The older protestant churches were somewhat eclipsed by the Roman Catholic Church in most of these new industrial areas. This state was to exist well into the 20th century.

Today Brooklyn has become somewhat of a “commuter community”, even though there is some commercial activity. Many of the stately old colonial homes still exist, we still have some farms, and also the smaller homes built in the post-war boom. But the close proximity of large cities such as Boston, Providence and Worcester with expensive real estate and high taxes has made the lower land costs and lower taxes very attractive for the commute to these larger areas. An increase has been seen in the building of large new homes, bringing in folks having a variety of needs, wealth and desires.

The way of family life has changed drastically in the past few years. The automobile and good roads have given folks the ability to travel easily. The advent of television has filled the entertainment needs of large masses. The young folks have available all sorts of organized sports, even taking place on Sundays (to the dismay of church folk). Our schools are expanding, not just in size but in cultural diversity. Fraternal organizations, such as the Grange and the Masons, have seen a decline in interest, much as have the churches.

A church that wants to maintain its place in the life of its congregation and looks forward to growth as the Town grows must become aware of the dynamics of these factors. Programs that are attractive to the needs of the young families are vital to this, but at the same time there must be attention given to the needs of the growing senior population.

Looking at those attending Sunday worship services can tell something about how well our church is doing in meeting the needs of its members. It used to be that one could look out over the congregation and see a large number of folks with gray hair. Today there are still these folks, but also there are a large number of younger adults and their children.

History probably will not repeat itself in Brooklyn. There will probably never be any large expansion of a commercial base. Relative wealth will continue to be offset by relative poverty. New families will continue to look to Brooklyn as a fine place to live, and will expect to find there the amenities to which they have become accustomed; good homes, good schools, and a church that satisfies their inner spiritual needs.

It is only through an understanding and appreciation of the dynamic demographics of our town that our church can move forward with strength in a changing world.

Conflicts

Conflict has been a part of the life of most organizations, even including the Christian Church. In the early days of the Church, the apostle Paul struggled with the conflicts in the new Church at Corinth. The Church was faced with conflict at the time of the Reformation. The Pilgrims set off for the New World because of conflicts, and even then were faced with more conflicts as the new nation grew. So it should not be surprising that conflict still exists in the life of the Church.

We become uncomfortable when we acknowledge that there have been recent conflicts in the Federated Church. The departure of one pastor came about because of financial and sexual misconduct on his part, causing him to lose ministerial standing and be dismissed from the church. The disruption and division was devastating. The church struggled to work through these dynamics, with help from interim ministers and the church soon felt that it was ready to call a new pastor. But she was asked to leave because of growing internal conflict in the church. In this very short pastorate the old conflicts were not resolved but instead were heightened

Each time a Pastor leaves a church there are those who continue their support of that pastor, even if that departure comes about because of a somewhat normal chain of events, and the church faces new conflicts. Division and unrest is a result, and the church has some hard work to do to once again become strong and united.

Historically, in the past there has not been much help to a church that finds itself embroiled in conflict. When a pastor had departed, someone was called as “supply” – to supply the pulpit until a new pastor had been called. But in the past few years this has changed. Both the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the American Baptist Churches (ABC) have established a cadre of ordained persons who serve as an Interim Minister to churches in transition. These ministers have

been trained to help the congregation do the hard work needed to recover from the conflicts and regain their sense of balance.

But even the tenure of an Interim Minister can contribute to the conflict in the church. This ministry is acknowledged to be a short-term period of help and healing, but the folks of the church come to feel comfortable with this pastor, and when that interim ministry comes to its close, again there is a sense of loss and feeling of conflict.

Such has been the recent history of our church. Some have decided not to do the hard work of recovering from these conflicts, and have instead left the church to seek a new worship experience in another place. Fortunately there have been many who remained loyal to their church, and have done the hard work to get through these conflicts. And we have been fortunate to have new folks who have found our church to meet their needs as a worshipping community.

As we have strolled together through the history of our church in the past few weeks it should become clear that our Federated Church has had, and can continue to have, an influence in the life of our community and its people. How well the future will reflect a commitment to be a Christian witness in this community will depend a lot upon how we learn from our history, how we work to resolve the conflicts in our Church life, and how we move bravely and confidently into the years to come.

May our history in future years reflect that this is what we have done together.

John Wilcox, Church Historian - March 2015